Redefining "Research": Becoming a Better Reader

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"Word Echoes in Carlyle's *Past and Present*," the article on which this lesson is based, is one of the illustrations I use in my classes to discuss the elementary research paper. In this kind of paper, "research" is fundamentally what *you* find in a work of literary art, not a hodgepodge of what others have to say about the work.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Select a single volume of a good writer. The ideal way is to get a copy of your own so that you can mark up the margins. As you read, put an *x* by the side of an idea, a word, an image that you consider worth remembering. Then when you run across the same idea or motif again (as you well might in the language of a work of art), put the *x* beside that too. As you continue to read, you may find another idea or word or image that seems significant to you. Put a *y* in the margin beside that one, and continue the process as you continue to read. You may find that one or two of your alphabetical symbols turn up often whereas others fade out; and you would then eliminate those that do not persist. Of course, if you use a library book for your project, you would use cards with your quotations on them and marked with your alphabetical symbols.

This process will be your attempt to formulate what seems to occur when we read a work of literary art. As we begin to read, many things may be said that seem to convey little to us. We file them away close to the threshold of consciousness, where they lie until the literary artist, by a series of echoes and recapitulations, brings them to life for us, gives them meaning.

The meanings that you derive from your series of quotations are dependent on your own imagination and judgment. You have probably been told, or will be told, not to write impressionistically. Don't believe a word of it. Your own impressions will be the lifeblood of your writing. But be as sure as you can be that your impressions are supported sufficiently. "Just impressionism" *is* bad, but your impressions supported by the best evidence and logic you are capable of is good. Don't be afraid to get yourself out on a limb, but be sure that your limb is strong enough to hold you up!

Once you have become aware of a particular idea or word or image and how it is used in a particular work, try to generalize from your specific readings—that is, keep asking yourself "What does all this mean?"

Some of the things that you find in such a study may have been noticed by other writers, and maybe you could see if such findings have been published. But don't try to find out *before* you make your own investigation. If you do, you will destroy the benefit I believe you will derive from the discoveries made on your own.

You could take a volume of Emily Dickinson and make a study of her language. Emily Dickinson never did go anywhere much, so her poetry is full of the things she saw and did around home. She helped with the housekeeping, cooking, cleaning up, dusting, making beds, putting things away in drawers, mending, and sewing, and she uses the words and "pictures" connected with such things—words like *bonnets, hats, shoes, needles, thread, tattered seams,* and so on. She was in the garden behind her house a good deal, so her poetry is full of things she saw there, linnets, snakes, butterflies, bumblebees, and all the colors in the garden. Or every time you see religious language in her poetry, make a note of it and say what it refers to in the Bible, how she uses it in the poem, words like *heavenly Father, devil, iniquity, deity, Eden, sacrament, resurrection, Tabernacle, divine, doom, heresy,* and all the biblical names she uses. She just talked to people in the family, and her father and brother were lawyers. Every time you run across something that looks like a legal term, make a note of it, words like *briefs, clauses, codicils, emolument, proviso, estates.*

But I believe this time it would be better for you to use a volume of good nonfiction prose, and it would be hard to beat Carlyle.

LESSON READINGS

Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1843), Chapter 1.

John Tyree Fain, "Word Echoes in Carlyle's *Past and Present,*" *Victorian Newsletter,* August 1955.

READING

John Tyree Fain

WORD ECHOES IN CARLYLE'S *PAST AND PRESENT*

Past and Present has perhaps been accorded too little attention as a work of art. A study of Carlyle's repetitive devices is particularly rewarding. For the work is full of key words and phrases that echo like bells struck now and again in the impassioned prose, producing the effect of refrain and playing their part in the integration of the several themes. In one of his favorite repetitive patterns Carlyle takes an incident from history, mythology, or the daily press and uses it as an illustration or as a symbol in the development of a social theme. While presenting the incident, he repeats a certain word or phrase often enough to enable it to act as a vehicle for its context. Then when he wishes to refer to the same theme again, the echoed word or phrase calls up the whole imaginative, emotional manifold of the first treatment. For instance, in the first chapter, which develops the Midas legend as a symbol of the condition of England, the exposition is built around the word "enchanted." England is full of wealth but no man can touch it, for it is enchanted fruit. "Twelve hundred thousand" workers sit enchanted in their "Poor-law Prisons." Master workers and master unworkers are also subject to the "baleful fiat as of Enchantment." In the six pages (Centenary Edition) of the first chapter "enchanted" and "enchantment" occur eleven times. Then they are available throughout the book and are used dozens of times; their impacted meaning also exerts influence on a cluster of words such as "phantasm," "phantasmagory," "chimera."

In the meantime other words are being developed in a similar manner. In the first chapter itself Carlyle tells about the Stockport Assizes case in which parents poison three children to collect burial fees. Thereafter merely the name Stockport holds within itself as it reverberates through the pages the images and details of the initial narrative: "Yes, in the Ugolino Hunger-tower stern things happen. . . . And now Tom being killed, and all spent and eaten, is it little starveling Jack that must go, or poor little starveling Will?—What a committee of ways and means!" (p. 4)

Thus the process of building and utilizing a vocabulary continues. One can feel some of the pulsing life of the book by calling to mind typical instances: the sphinx as a symbol of justice and nature's law, the widow who died of typhus and proved her sisterhood by infecting the whole neighborhood, the men of the Dead Sea changed into apes, payment by forfeiting a grinder tooth, the horse hair and iron body of the Pope riding through the streets of Rome, Igdrasil, the champion of England encased in tin, the seven-foot hat. Of course, not all of the words and phrases that form repetitive patterns are built up by the process outlined. Some of them are just taken from the press or popular parlance and used so often that they acquire added power merely from the echo itself, for instance, "Corn-Laws," "Sliding-Scale," "Useful Knowledge

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Society," "Supply and Demand," "Morrison's Pill," "bribery elections," "gig-man." These words and phrases, then, however they may have become charged with additional power, interweave in the formation of the rich Carlylean texture: "Two million shirtless or ill-shirted workers sit enchanted in Workhouse Bastilles, five million more (according to some) in Ugolino Hunger-cellars; and for remedy, you say,—what say you?—'Raise *our* rents!' I have not in my time heard any stranger speech, not even on the Shores of the Dead Sea." (p. 171)

The most frequent echo in *Past and Present* depends upon the words "silent" and "silence." The workmen of England sit silent. Abbot Samson's best quality is his "talent of silence." Even Plugson of Undershot is ennobled by the "force of silence" in him. Silence is a medium through which man communicates with God: "There shall be a depth of Silence in thee . . . a Silence unsoundable; known to God only." (p. 200) In fact, "silence," which is used in so many senses that it is not definable as a concept, is one of the devices that enable Carlyle to maintain the level of the sublime in parts of *Past and Present*. Of the dictum "Work Is Worship" he says:

> He that understands it well, understands the Prophecy of the whole Future; the last Evangel . . . its litany and psalmody the noble acts, the heroic work and suffering, and true heart-utterance of all the Valiant of the Sons of Men. Its choir-music the ancient Winds and Oceans, and deep-toned, inarticulate, but most speaking voices of Destiny and History,—supernal ever as of old. Between two Silences:
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> 'Stars silent rest o'er us,
> Graves under us silent!' (p. 233)

That is, "silence" is one of the means by which Carlyle is enabled to consider man in his sublime aspect. And *Past and Present* is therefore, among other things, a sort of paean to man: "Ye are most strong, ye sons of the icy North, of the far East,—far marching from your rugged Eastern wilderness, hitherward from the gray dawn of Time." (p. 276) This fact accounts for some of its impact on the age, for it is one of the two or three most influential English books of the nineteenth century. Men were yearning for an antidote to scientific investigations which gave them a smaller and smaller place in the universe.

The passages quoted suggest another device which helps to maintain the sublime level—the repetition of words indicating vast stretches of time and space, the infinite, the innamable, the unfathomed, the unspeakable. But this seems sufficient to point up an approach that some students of Carlyle may not have emphasized sufficiently. *Past and Present* is a remarkable social document, as all commentators agree. It is more remarkable as a work of art.